



"Now there happened a strange and inexplicable thing."

The Willow Landscape

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A weird Chinese fantasy

THE picture was more than five hundred years old; but time had not changed its colors, unless to touch them with the mellow softness of ancient hours, the gathering morbidezza

of bygone things. It had been painted by a great artist of the Sung dynasty, on silk of the finest weave, and mounted on ebony rollers tipped with silver. For twelve generations it had been one of the most cher-

ished possessions of Shih Liang's forefathers. And it was equally cherished by Shih Liang himself, who, like all his ancestors, was a scholar, a poet, and a lover of all beauty shared by art and nature. Often, in his dreamiest or most meditative moods, he would unroll the painting and gaze upon its idyllic loveliness with the feeling of one who retires to the remoteness and seclusion of a mountain-warded valley. It consoled him in a measure for the bustle and blare and intrigue of the imperial court, where he held an official post of no small honor: since he was not altogether native to such things and would have preferred, like the olden sages, the philosophic peace of a hermitage bowered amid some leafy grove.

The picture represented a pastoral scene of the most ideal and visionary beauty. In the background arose lofty mountains rendered vague by the slow withdrawal of morning mists; in the foreground a little stream descended in mimic turbulence to a tranquil lake, and was crossed on its way by a rustic bridge of bamboo, more charming than if it were made of royal lacquer. Beyond the stream and around the lake were willows of vernal green more lovely than anything ever beheld except in vision or memory. Incomparable was their grace, ineffable their waving; they were like the willows of Shou Shan, the Taoist paradise; and they trailed their foliage as leaning women trail their unbound hair. Partly hidden among them was a tiny hut; and a maiden dressed in peony pink and white was crossing the bamboo bridge. Somehow the picture was more than a painting, was more than an actual scene: it possessed all the enchantment of far-off things for which the heart has longed vainly, the charm of forfeit years and lost places. Surely the artist had mingled with its hues the diviner iris of dream or of retrospect, and the wine-sweet tears of a nostalgia long denied.

Shih Liang felt that he knew the land-

scape more intimately than any real scene. Each time that he gazed upon it, his sensations were those of a returning wanderer. It became to him the cool and sequestered retreat in which he found a never-failing refuge from the weariness of his days. And though he was of an ascetic turn and had never married nor sought the company of women, the presence of the peony maiden on the bridge was by no means exceptionable; in fact, her tiny figure, with its more than mortal charm, was somehow an essential part of the composition and was no less important to its perfection than the stream, the willows, the lake, and the far mountains with their riven veils of mist. And she seemed to companion him in the visits and sojournings of revery, when he would imagine himself repairing to the little hut or roaming beneath the delicate foliage.

In truth, Shih Liang had need of such refuge and companionship, illusory though they were. Aside from his younger brother, Po Lung, a boy of sixteen, he was without living relatives or comrades; and the family fortunes, declining through several generations, had left him the heritor of many debts and little cash or property, except a number of priceless art-treasures. His life was increasingly sad, and oppressed by ill-health and poverty. Much of the stipend from his secretarial post at the court was necessarily devoted to the canceling of inherited obligations; and the remainder was barely enough for his own sustenance and the education of his brother.

SHIH LIANG was approaching middle age; and his honorable heart was rejoicing over the payment of the last family debt, when there came a fresh stroke of misfortune. Through no fault of his own, but the machinations of an envious fellow-scholar, Shih Liang was dismissed from his position and found himself without means of support. No other post offered

itself; for an unmerited disgrace was attached to the imperial dismissal. In order to procure the necessities of life and continue his brother's education, Shih Liang was now forced to sell one by one the irreplaceable heirlooms, the antique carvings of jade and ivory, the rare porcelains and paintings of the ancestral collection. This he did with extreme reluctance, with a sense of utter shame and profanation, such as could be felt only by a true lover of such things, and by one whose soul was consecrated to the past and to the memory of his fathers.

The days and years went by, the collection dwindled piece by piece; and the time drew near when the studies of Po Lung would be completed, when he would be a scholar versed in all the classics and eligible for a position of both honor and profit. . . . But now the porcelains and lacquers, the jades and ivories had all been sold; and the paintings were likewise gone, all except the willow landscape so dearly cherished by Shih Liang.

A mortal and inassuageable sorrow, a dismay colder than the chill of death itself, entered Shih Liang's heart when he realized the truth. It seemed to him that he could no longer live if he should sell the picture. But if he did not sell it, how could he complete the fraternal duty which he owed to Po Lung? There was but one possible course; and he sent word at once to the mandarin Mung Li, a connoisseur who had purchased other pieces from the old collection, telling him that the willow picture was now for sale. Mung Li had long coveted this picture. He came in person, his eyes gleaming in his fat face with the avidity of a collector who scents a bargain; and the transaction was soon made. The money was paid at once; but Shih Liang begged leave to retain the picture for another day before delivering it to the mandarin.

And knowing that Shih Liang was a

man of honor, Mung Li assented to this request.

When the mandarin had gone, Shih Liang unrolled the landscape and hung it on the wall. His stipulation to Mung Li had been prompted by the irresistible feeling that he must have one more hour of communion with the beloved scene, must repair once more in revery to its inviolate retreat. After that, he would be as one without a home or a sanctuary: for he knew that in all the world, whether in art or reality, there was nothing that could afford a like asylum for his dreams.

The mellowing rays of earliest eventide were sifted upon the silk volumen where it hung on the bare wall; but for Shih Liang the painting was steeped in a light of supernal enchantment, was touched by more than the muted splendor of the falling sun. And it seemed to him that never before had the foliage been so tender with immortal spring, or the mist about the mountain so glamorous with eternally dissolving opal, or the maiden upon the bridge so lovely with unfading youth. And somehow, by an unaccountable sorcery of perspective, the painting itself had grown larger and deeper, and had mysteriously assumed even more of the illusion of an actual place.

With unshed tears in his heart, like an exile who bids farewell to his natal valley, Shih Liang enjoyed the sorrowful luxury of looking upon the willow picture for the last time. As on a thousand former occasions, his fancy strolled beneath the branches and beside the lake, it inhabited the hut whose roof was so tantalizingly revealed and concealed, it peered at the mountain-tops from behind the foliage, or paused upon the bridge to converse with the peony maiden.

And now there happened a strange and inexplicable thing. Though the sun had gone down while Shih Liang continued to gaze and dream, and twilight had thick-

ened in the room, the picture itself was no less plain and luminous than before, as if it were lit by another sun than that of contemporary time and space. And the landscape had grown even larger, till it seemed to Shih Liang that he was looking through an open door on a veritable scene.

Then, as bewilderment assailed him, he heard a whisper that was not an actual voice, but which seemed to issue from the landscape and become audible as a thought in his mind. And the whisper said:

"Because you have loved me so long and so dearly, and because your heart is native here but alien to all the world beside, it is now permitted that I should become for you the very refuge of which you have dreamed, and a place in which you can wander and abide for ever.

So, with the surpassing joy of one whose fondest dream has been verified, who inherits the heaven of his revery, Shih Liang passed from the twilight room into the morning picture. And the ground was soft with a flower-embroidered grass beneath his heel; and the willow leaves murmured in an April wind that blew from long ago; and he saw the door of the half-hidden hut as he had never seen it before except in fancy; and the peony maiden smiled when he approached her, and answered his greeting in a voice that was like the speech of the willows and the blossoms.

The disappearance of Shih Liang was a matter of brief concern to those who

had known him. It was readily believed that his financial sorrows had driven him to suicide, probably by drowning in the great river that ran beside the capital.

Po Lung, having received the money left by his brother from the sale of the last painting, was enabled to finish his education.

The willow landscape, which had been found hanging on the wall of Shih Liang's abode, was duly claimed by its purchaser, the mandarin Mung Li.

The mandarin was delighted with his acquisition; but there was one detail which puzzled him considerably when he unrolled the volumen and examined it. He could remember only one figure, a maiden in pink and white, on the rustic bamboo bridge; and now there were two figures! Mung Li inspected the second figure with much curiosity, and was doubly surprised when he noted that it bore a singular resemblance to Shih Liang. But it was very tiny, like that of the maiden; and his eyes were dim from peering at so many porcelains and lacquers and paintings; so he could not be entirely sure. However, it was undeniably peculiar.

Mung Li might have thought the matter still stranger, if he had looked more often at the painting. He might have found that the peony maiden and the person who resembled Shih Liang were sometimes engaged in other diversions than that of merely passing the time of day on the bamboo bridge.

